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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000159

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SUBJECT: INDIAN MILITARY PROTESTS CHINESE ACTIVITIES ON THE SIKKIM BORDER

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CLASSIFIED BY: Henry V. Jardine, Principal Officer, U.S.
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REASON: 1.4 (a), (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 15, during a scheduled Indo-Chinese division commander-level meeting at Sikkim's Nathu La Pass on the Tibetan border, Indian officers reportedly protested what they characterized as repeated Chinese intrusions into northern Sikkim's "Finger Area." Indian press has noted an apparent increase in Chinese military "intrusions" along the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) demarcating India's northeastern border with China. Just since the beginning of 2008, 50 incidents of Chinese patrols into the Finger Area have been reported. Retired Lieutenant General (Lt. Gen.) and former Indian Army Eastern Command Chief of Staff John Ranjan Mukherjee told ConGen that he also believed that the Chinese have been more assertive in pushing the Chinese interpretation of the LAC, with more patrols, construction of roads and removal of Indian bunkers. Mukherjee and a local British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) correspondent both commented to ConGen that the increased Chinese activity on the border was an expression of China's dissatisfaction with growing Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation. Recent anti-Chinese protests in Tibet further serve to exacerbate apparent Chinese irritation with India and its continued willingness to accommodate Tibetan refugees and to use Tibetans in its military. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a May 15 division commander meeting between Indian and Chinese officers at Nathu La, on the Sikkim-Tibet border, the Indian's reportedly protested Chinese patrolling in northern Sikkim's Finger Area. This area is considered strategically important as it is part of the Dolma plateau and overlooks the "Sora Funnel," which would channel any invading Chinese forces into the narrow Chumbi Valley. Apparently, the Chinese have been asserting their claim to the area by blasting and removing stone cairns, or rock piles that can be used as shelter, and have been constructing a road. The Chinese argue that the region falls on their side of the LAC, while the Indian's protest that the area is shown as Indian on a 1924 Survey of India map.

¶ 13. (C) 50 Chinese patrols into the Finger Area have been reported since the beginning of the year. Media have characterized the Chinese transgressions over the last year as increasing in frequency, with 140 incidents along the LAC reported in 2007. In April Defense Minister A.K. Anthony and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee publicly played down the incidents as being due to "differing perceptions" as to the position of the LAC. However, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John Ranjan Mukherjee, who has extensive experience in the region and retains close contacts in the military, told ConGen that he believes the LAC incidents have increased. His view was repeated by local BBC correspondent Subir Bhaumik. Bhaumik added that the patrols have increased not just in frequency, but also in overall size and territorial assertiveness in pushing the China's LAC claims.

¶ 14. (C) Both Mukherjee and Bhaumik in separate conversations attributed the recent increase in Chinese assertiveness to the growing Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation and possibly the prospects of civil nuclear cooperation. Both believed that the Chinese were sending a message of displeasure with this cooperation. Bhaumik claimed that his contacts in the Indian Army Eastern Command noted a marked spike in incidents by the Chinese corresponding with the September 2007 Malabar joint naval exercises, which included India, the U.S. and other nations, in the Andaman Islands. Bhaumik said that contrary to efforts by Indian leaders to paint a positive picture, relations between the Indian and Chinese militaries are tense. According to Bhaumik, a contact of his who participated in the December 2007 Indo-Chinese joint infantry training exercise in Kunming told him that the interactions between the countries' soldiers

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were very stiff and cold and that a reciprocal exercise, with Chinese soldiers coming to India this summer, appears to be on hold.

¶ 15. (C) Mukherjee commented that contentious areas around Sikkim, presently in the Finger Area and in 2007 in the Sino-Sikkim-Bhutan trijunction area, are because of their strategic importance. The Chumbli Valley, which runs north-south on the Chinese side of the LAC, is the primary potential invasion route into Sikkim. However, the valley is narrow and would channel the Chinese into a kill zone. Therefore, Chinese are maneuvering for flanking positions on higher ground overlooking the Chumbli Valley, with the Finger area on the Dolma plateau in the north and the Doka La in the south. Also, the Chinese have been busy building more roads to these areas to develop easier access.

¶ 16. (C) Bhaumik also believed that the recent anti-Chinese protests in Tibet may be exacerbating the LAC disputes. He said that India's continued sheltering of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees constitutes a persistent and now more apparent irritant. In addition, when then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao signed the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement, India committed to not using Tibetans in its military or security forces. However, the Tibetan-manned Special Frontier Force and other units incorporating Tibetans have been retained and used by the Indian military along the western border.

¶ 17. (C) Comment: Chinese forces do appear to be taking more assertive action on the LAC in India's northeast. Local contacts attribute this to China's harder line against closer Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation and the recent increase in incidents, coming in the last two years, does appear to

correspond to the rapid growth in Indo-U.S. relations. Regardless of the cause, or the circumstances of Chinese "incursions," it is evident that the Chinese continue to push for greater military advantage along the disputed LAC and that conditions are far less cordial in the border areas than indicated in pronouncements by India's senior leaders.

JARDINE